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UNITY AND DIVERSITY: THE HISTORY AND CULTURE OF ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA

This article has been contributed by Dr D. R. Horton, General Editor, Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

Aboriginal culture and history have both been characterised as on the one hand showing great continuities through time and space, and on the other as showing great change through time and great diversity across space. Both characterisations are true, both have been the subject of caricatures of Aboriginal society by whites, and both have influenced the politics of Aboriginal Australia. Aboriginal people take great pride in their personal and group identity. Differentiation of almost every aspect of culture and society has been used at some time, somewhere, to form a mark of identity. In spite of the diversity however, no matter where Aboriginal people come from in Australia they are recognised, and recognise each other, as being one people.

Aboriginal people have been in Australia for more than 50,000 year. Because they were still living by hunting and gathering, and using stone tools, 200 years ago, they were seen as being like the Palaeolithic (Stone Age) people of Europe. Whereas the Palaeolithic people had eventually developed agriculture, pottery, metals and the wheel, on their way to civilisation, Aboriginal people, it was said, were like fossils, remaining unchanged for thousands of years.

The apparently simple lifestyle of Aboriginal people also resulted in two other misconceptions - that Aboriginal people were culturally uniform, and that they had so little attachment to the land, and made so little use of it that James Cook could practise the sleight of hand of describing the continent as terra nullius (empty land) even though his landings were opposed with spears and fire.

Archaeological work in Australia has led to the gradual discovery that Aboriginal people had indeed, as they said, been here a very long time. Just a century ago the best estimate of the time of occupation of Australia was 400 years; the best estimate now is over 100 times as long.

The other gradual discovery was that during this enormously long time there had been great changes in the geography of Australia. Some 30,000 years ago the country had been mainly a green and pleasant land in which giant animals roamed, lakes were full, and mountains were snow covered. Conversely 15,000 years ago the land was even more heartbreaking than it is now, with the desert core hugely enlarged, and sand dunes blowing in Victoria and even part of Tasmania. Around 10,000 years ago the climate and vegetation patterns reached approximately their present

condition. Through all this time sea levels were also fluctuating. At their lowest point Australia formed one giant land mass from the bottom of Tasmania through to New Guinea. Over such a long period, and with such major changes it is impossible to imagine any group of people remaining culturally and technologically static.

A major thrust of archaeological research has been the examination of the kinds of adaptive responses which Aboriginal people made to these changes. Stone tools show little change through the Pleistocene period (from about two million to 10,000 years ago) but since these are choppers and scrapers, used mainly only to create other tools of wood and therefore simple in form this might be expected. These wooden tools rarely survive in the earth, but we know from one unique archaeological find that the boomerang (and the barbed spear) was invented more than 10,000 years ago.

Rock art also shows changes in wooden tools and such other perishable items as headdresses. Around 5,000 years ago there was even a radical change in the stone tools themselves, with small, delicately worked points and blades beginning to be produced. This change may have been associated with the use of composite tools, that is, with points used on a spear in place of a sharpened wooden end.

Throughout the ancient history of the Aboriginal people there were many changes more important than technological ones. Many different styles of rock art appeared in different regions, and there are changes over time, from the stylised, symbolic ancient engravings to the colourful X-ray art of the north and the vivid hunting scenes of east and west. Together with changes in burial practices, such differences undoubtedly reflect changing religious beliefs and rituals.

Economic change was also a feature of Aboriginal life in the past. Several thousand years ago the Tasmanians stopped eating fish. In the north by contrast, large and complex stone fish traps were built to more efficiently harvest the sea's resources. At some time in the last 25,000 years the giant animals became extinct; at another time people began using grindstones to make efficient use of cereals and other seeds. Mountains and desert lands were used from very early times, though the use seems always to have been cautious.

Over an unimaginably long period of time and the immense distances of the Australian continent, regional differences in language, religion, social organisation, art, economy and material culture arose. Some of these differences in resources and material culture could be balanced by trade, and over time great trade routes developed. Goods could travel all the way from the north to the south of the continent. Other routes went from east to west, or from the centre to the edge.

Not only goods travelled these routes, but ideas for technological innovation, and songs, ceremonies and news all travelled with the lines of people carrying baskets of pituri or ochre on their heads, or bundles of spears on their shoulders.

Rising seas affected weather patterns and ecological conditions on shores and in estuaries. Most importantly, however, they affected some aspects of communication. In the north there was no longer a trade route by land, but the many islands of Torres Strait continued to provide for sea trade between Cape York and New Guinea. In the south, however, the distances were too great and around the time the boomerang was being invented, the Tasmanians lost touch with the mainland.

Diversity has always been a feature of Aboriginal society and has been manifested in many different ways. There were several hundred distinct languages (two-thirds of which are now extinct), each on average having several dialects. Songs, stories, dances, ceremonies, Dreamings and paintings were all owned in different ways depending on complex laws. People took pride in differences in initiation practices. The houses they lived in, the spears that were carried, and the animals that were hunted all differed in subtle ways between neighbours and

differed greatly over great distances.

In spite of the diversity at another level, Aboriginal culture shows many consistent features across the continent. The fact that there were no invasions before 1788 contributed to this unity - all Aboriginal people are related to each other. Trade also helped, but it thrived on the fact of difference. The greatest contributors to maintaining unity were probably the great ceremonial meetings which took place in all parts of Australia when seasonal conditions were suitable and abundant food sources were available. People travelled hundreds of kilometres to such gatherings, and hundreds, perhaps thousands of people could gather for some weeks on each occasion.

These gatherings were a chance to catch up on news from distant places, arrange marriages, sit down with kinfolk who had not been seen for a year or more, hear new stories and take part in new dances. These were times when the elders could find out what environmental conditions were like in surrounding areas, settle disputes, and learn such things as new techniques for making fine stone points. To do all those things meant learning a number of other languages - all Aboriginal people were multilingual - and this in turn meant that words and concepts could spread from one language to another. Because they spent most of the year in small groups spread over a very varied continent, Aboriginal people were very diverse - meeting regularly maintained their Aboriginality.

When the seas rose at the end of the Pleistocene period they did not separate Australia from the rest of the world, but simply provided an alternative pathway to the continent. Torres Strait and Bass Strait became areas that people would sail through, and while the islands of Bass Strait were too far apart, the seas too dangerous and the climate too poor to support a population, the archipelago of islands in the Torres Strait became the home of a seafaring people. The rising seas, and the visitors they brought, would provide a new source of diversity over the last few hundred years of Aboriginal history.

In the north, beginning hundreds, perhaps thousands of years ago, there were two groups who regularly visited Australia. From the north-east, using Torres Strait as a north-south highway for canoes, came the Melanesians. They travelled considerable distances down both sides of Cape York, bringing and trading such items as improved fishing equipment, drums and the songs that went with them, new Dreaming stories, and the canoes themselves. A similar range of cultural and technological items returned north with them. From the north-west came the first of the ocean-going sailing ships which would continue to reach Australia in their hundreds in the years to come. The first fleets were Macassan manned by Indonesian fishermen who came to Australia to exploit the harvest of trepang, which they cured on the spot and took back for their own trading purposes. They traded such items as tobacco, iron and glass and some technological know-how, for the privilege of fishing in Aboriginal territorial waters, and their visits were commemorated in song, ceremony and art.

Like the Melanesians and Macassans, the European ships which began sailing into southern Australian waters in the eighteenth century, also became a source of diversity, though in this case because they would leave human cargoes behind. They were also, incidentally recorded in art and ceremony. The geographic position of people in relation to the different invasion zones, the different characteristics of the invasions and the responses of Aboriginal people to them, and the subsequent history of each area affected people in diverse ways.

People who were close to the site of an invasion were sometimes killed and always suffered immediate interference with their economy and lifestyle (because the colonists wanted good sources of water, sheltered positions and access to fish, all of which were also important to Aboriginal people). As the colonists made it plain they were staying, and began altering landscapes (clearing trees, building fences) resistance grew and more Aboriginal people were killed. As land was occupied, numbers reduced and way of life destroyed, the survivors began

living within or on the fringe of the new European community.

For those living at some distance from a colony, some of the effects tended to be more indirect but no less devastating. Diseases, some not life-threatening to Europeans, devastated Aboriginal people, who lacked immunity. This factor alone may have had such an effect that it is possible that the Aboriginal population was originally several times higher than the estimated figure of 300,000 in 1788, even though that estimate was based on figures collected early in the nineteenth century. Also impossible to resist were the spreading effects of feral animals such as rabbit, cat and fox, and of domestic animals such as sheep and cattle. These animals muddied waterholes, making them unusable and unproductive, and changed vegetation patterns.

While disease and ecological change were impossible to resist, there was resistance to those who tended the flocks and herds. In most parts of Australia guerilla wars were fought all along the expanding front-line of white invasion. In some parts of Australia, farmers took matters into their own hands and formed vigilante groups, often responding to the killing of sheep and cattle (by people whose economic livelihood had been taken) by killing groups of women and children. In other areas the feared Native Police rode out to the fringes of settlement and killed Aboriginal people.

In some areas Aboriginal people came willingly into settlements because their kin were already there and because of tales of free food and tobacco and exotic clothes and other goods. In some areas the police rounded up people and brought them forcibly into the mission or government settlement. In parts of Australia people did not come into settlements but became attached to cattle or sheep stations, the men and women working for rations and accommodation.

The subsequent history of settlements was strongly influenced by factors such as which religious group ran the mission, what policy the government settlement was operating under, or what the attitude of individual pastoralists was towards Aboriginal people. Some missions had an active policy of destroying Aboriginal culture - Aboriginal languages could not be spoken, ceremonies could not be performed, kin from outside could not be visited. People were dressed in European clothing and given manual labour to do; usually the children were totally isolated from their parents in dormitories. Other missions worked within traditional culture, adapting teachings and practices to suit local conditions. Much the same dichotomy applied in government reserves. In some States children could be removed from their parents and sent off to institutions or for adoption by white families. On all but the most enlightened pastoral stations, big ceremonial gatherings and movement of kin from one station to another were forbidden. In all States in fact the movement of Aboriginal people was controlled, in some cases very harshly.

Another factor which historically contributed to differences between Aboriginal communities was whether non-Aboriginal groups other than pastoralists were present in an area. Gold rushes had major impacts where they occurred. The activities of sealers (who stole women and killed men and children) in the south and pearlers (who stole young boys) in the north were equally devastating.

Aboriginal people responded in a variety of different ways to the presence of Europeans in their country. While some people threw spears at strangers, others treated them well (in at least some cases because they thought whites were spirits of dead Aboriginal people). Some explorers were ambushed while being guided by Aboriginal people. While many groups readily accepted Christianity many others did not. In some regions groups have adapted to life on cattle stations whereas others have managed to maintain a hunter-gatherer economy.

While the large groups in settlements and missions were similar in size to those which formed for ceremonial occasions, there were two important differences. The groupings were permanent and their composition had been imposed as a result of non-Aboriginal considerations. Groups no longer spread out, and movement controls and restriction of ceremonies meant that Aboriginal

people were much more isolated from each other than they had ever been before.

The factors that resulted in groups having different histories also tended to result in cultural variety. In some areas gospel songs with a uniquely Aboriginal (or Torres Strait Islander) flavour were written and performed, in others country and western music or blues styles were developed. In the visual arts, new materials began to be used and new styles were developed. Aboriginal people developed different lifestyles based on different economic factors, and this, together with a sense of shared histories and kinship links within communities, was reflected in language styles.

In the 1930s a protest movement began which continues today. While recognising the cultural differences between Aboriginal people, and the differences in their needs based on different circumstances, it is a movement that has seen the similarities as being more important. All Aboriginal people suffered prejudice and had a history of mistreatment by white society and all measures of their social well-being - housing, health, wages, employment, education, imprisonment etc. - show their disadvantage.

The protest movements at first tended to contribute to diversity by focusing on particular grievances. Gradually, however, restrictions on Aboriginal people began to be lifted and communications improved. People began to develop a sense of regional (for example, Koori, Mufti, Nyungar) identity, and organisations began to develop which were also either regional or State based. All of the restrictive legislation and the bodies formed to administer it, were State based, and this tended to give people a shared history, and a common target.

The 1967 referendum for the first time gave the Commonwealth Government power to legislate for Aboriginal people. While in some ways this was of more symbolic than practical value, the result and after effects did signal the beginning of action and organisation at a national level. There is still considerable diversity in both culture and political life in Aboriginal Australia. While all Aboriginal people share a desire to retain their identity, a belief in land rights, a desire to control their own affairs, and a desire to remove the economic and social disadvantages of Aboriginal people generally, there is considerable diversity in strategies to achieve those aims. While a sense of Aboriginality, a belief in particular styles and approaches, is held by all Aboriginal artists, musicians, sports people and writers, every Aboriginal person develops that Aboriginality in their own unique way. Every region of Australia has its own land council, and most have their own cultural centres, festivals and so on. Torres Strait Islanders have particularly expressed a wish to have the uniqueness of their own history and culture recognised, and some other regions have expressed similar views.

As in the past, however, meetings of groups and a sense of shared history and culture and common needs, will see the diverse indigenous peoples of Australia unified.

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